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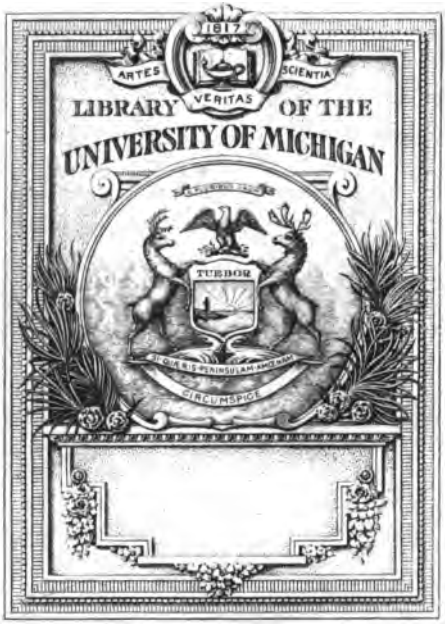
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# RAILWAY MAIL SERVICE:

## AN HISTORICAL SKETCH

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BEING

A LECTURE DELIVERED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO AND AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

45 1

BY

GEORGE GERARD TUNELL



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# RAILWAY MAIL SERVICE: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH.[1]

At the time our first railroads were opened the mail was carried on horseback, by sulkies, stages, four-horse post-coaches, packets, and steamboats. As the cities that could be served by steamboats were few in number the expedition that could be given the mail was measured by the speed and endurance of the horse. In favorable weather, when the roads were in good condition, the mails were carried with fair dispatch, and were delivered promptly at the appointed time. During a portion of the year 1833 the express mail was carried from Philadelphia to New York, a distance of ninety miles, in six hours, or at an average speed of fifteen miles per hour. But this, of course, was an extraordinary performance, and was only warranted by the disturbed and excited condition of public affairs that then prevailed. To maintain this speed the horses had to be changed every five miles. It was thus a relay race against time, with eighteen contestants. Two horses being needed to carry the mail, seventy-two horses were required for each day's service, with reserves to take the places of the disabled. The contractor received one dollar per mile run by each horse, a sum far in excess of the revenue received by the Post-Office Department from the mail carried.

[1] Delivered at the University of Chicago March 13, 1902, and at the University of Minnesota April 18, 1902.

The foregoing example presents one extreme. The other shows the all but impassable roads of the wet seasons, the heavy stages and post-coaches scarcely moving, the horses straining with all their might to drag these ponderous vehicles, often down to their very axles in the mud, at the rate of three or four miles per hour.

Such being the condition of affairs it would naturally be supposed that the mail would have been wholly transferred to the railways as soon as the latter began operations. But such was not the case. For several years, the railways seem to have been no more expeditious or reliable than the post-riders, stages, and post-coaches. As late as the year 1835, or six years after the successful trial of the "Stourbridge Lion" at Honesdale, the Postmaster-General threatened to remove the mails from several of the leading railways unless they were forwarded with greater expedition and certainty.[1]

This threat to remand the mail contractors back to the stages may seem strange in view of the records made in the two famous prize contests of Great Britain and the United States. As early as October, 1829, in the great Rainhill competition, brought about by the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, Stephenson with the "Rocket" is said to have attained a speed of twenty-nine miles per hour.[2] This record was soon equaled in our own country. During the summer of 1831 there was a contest just outside of Baltimore for the prize offered by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. One of the contesting locomotives, "The York," built by Phineas Davis of York, Pennsylvania, after undergoing certain modifications, was found capable of running a short distance on

[1] 48th Cong., 2d Session, Senate Ex. Doc. No. 40, pp. 22, 23.
[2] The Development of the Locomotive, Stretton, pp. 30-32.

a straight and level stretch of track at the rate of thirty miles per hour.[1]

Too much, however, can easily be inferred from these records. In all probability they are only estimates, and something must be allowed for the great enthusiasm that prevailed. But in any case they were extraordinary performances, and stand in no higher relation to what could then be done, day in and day out, than the wonderful bursts of speed of to-day stand in relation to the every-day performances of our engines.

The best locomotives now manufactured can attain and hold a speed for a short distance of certainly 90, and perhaps even 110, miles per hour, but the average running-speed of our fastest trains falls far short of even the lower of these figures. The running-speed of the fastest regular trains of the United States, and it might be added of the world, namely, those between Atlantic City and Camden, is 66.8 miles per hour. This run is, of course, only a dash, the distance by the longer route being but 59 miles with no stops between the termini. The running-speed of the Empire State Express on its journey of 440 miles from New York to Buffalo, deducting 8 minutes for the 4 station stops it makes, is 54.2 miles per hour, while the running-speed of the North-Western and Burlington fast mail trains on their long journey of 490 miles from Chicago to Council Bluffs, allowing 35 minutes for 13 station stops, is 51 miles per hour.

It was not until the first railways had been in operation for several years that the locomotive fully established its superiority over the horse in point of speed and reliability. Shortly after the opening of the first section of

[1] The Great Railway Celebrations of 1857, pp. 30-32.

the Baltimore and Ohio Railway to Ellicott's Mills, or in the summer of 1830, Peter Cooper, running the "Tom Thumb," a locomotive of his own construction, was distanced by a powerful gray horse drawing a car which by this victory became famous, and later played a conspicuous rôle in the public prints and early books on travel. Of course Cooper's discomfiture was due to an accident, the slipping of the belt that operated the blower. This, however, only emphasizes my point, namely, that the locomotive could not yet be counted upon for regular performances. In this contest Stockton and Stokes, the owners of the horse, undoubtedly did their best, for they were the great stage-owners of that day, and were determined not to let their mail contracts slip without a supreme effort to retain them.

That the average speed on the railways during the first decade of this form of transportation was little if any above that made by the post-riders and stages can readily be shown. Many of the contracts for the latter kind of service called for eight, nine, ten, and we have seen even as high as fifteen miles per hour. The railroads scarcely did better. On March 28, 1835, the Post-Office Department complained that "the mail from New York to Philadelphia, by railroad, is usually late, taking more than thirteen hours from Jersey City. [And then added] This was hardly the case in the worst of bad staging."[1] On April 30th of the same year, in another letter of rebuke, the Postmaster-General said: "There have been two failures of the mail from beyond Philadelphia, at this city, in the course of the present week, occasioned it is said, by accidents to the locomotive on the Amboy and Camden Railroad. These occurrences are

[1] 48th Cong., 2d Sen. Ex. Doc. No. 40, p. 23.

peculiarly annoying at this time, and have become the subject of public notice and complaint. From the experiences we have had the adaptation of the railroad to the purposes of mail transportation is becoming every day more and more questionable. It is very apparent that it cannot be relied on with that degree of certainty which is all important in the transmission of the mail, and without which disappointments occur to the public, and complaints are rung in the ears of the Department from every quarter of the country."[1] On November 24, 1837, it was ordered by the Postmaster-General that one Hutchinson be offered $350 for the conveyance of the President's message, on the first Tuesday in December, by express mail from Washington to New York. This mail was to leave Washington at noon and reach New York at 4:00 A. M. the next day."[2] As the distance was about 230 miles, the average speed stipulated was a little less than 14½ miles per hour. On December 12, 1838, the Postmaster-General approved the arrangement of the postmaster at Philadelphia, for carrying the President's message by special mail on the railroad from Philadelphia to New York in five hours for $500.[3] In 1833 the mail was carried between these cities by the post-riders in six hours. As late as 1839 the mail trains on the South Carolina Railroad averaged less than 11 miles per hour in running from Charleston to Hamburg, a distance of 138 miles. It will be remembered that this was the second railroad opened in the United States designed for a general freight and passenger business, and that it began to use the locomotive as early as 1830. And it

[1] Ibid., p. 23.
[2] Ibid., p. 31.
[3] Ibid., pp. 31, 32.

seems the Postmaster-General feared the trains might have difficulty in making even 11 miles per hour, for the contract covering this route stipulated that, "the way-mails are to be handed in and out, at the way stations, without stopping the cars entirely." [1]

While the examples cited show the railroads were but little superior to the post-riders and stages, they by no means present the railroad service at its worst. The railways I have selected were those first established, and connecting the principal cities, and therefore probably rendering the best service then to be found. Where the service extended over several railways it was even slower, for railway connections, unlike the stage connections, were very poor in those days. The running schedules of the different corporations seem to have been drawn up with the idea of making the breaks in travel as frequent and as long as possible. The traveler from Washington to New York, on arriving at Baltimore, would be likely to find that the train for Philadelphia had just departed, and on arriving at Philadelphia, he would be likely to find that the train for New York had just departed.

There was still another reason why the railways did not at first make much better time than the stages. In the early days, and for many years after the railways were established, the movement of trains during the night hours was very limited, and on almost all railroads was wholly suspended. This placed the railroad at a great disadvantage, because the bulk of the mail, the morning papers did not then count for much, accumulated in the afternoon. The stages and post-coaches would start with it in the early evening, and where the

[1] Ibid., p. 33.

distance was not great, as for instance, between Baltimore and Washington, the mail would be at its destination about the time the train started the next morning. As late as October, 1841, some of the railways involved refused to adopt schedules urged by the Postmaster-General, which would have very materially expedited the mail between Boston and Charleston, because they called for night running, and would not yield, although the Postmaster-General intimated Congress would indemnify them for the additional difficulties and expense incident to running in the night-time.[1] Shortly before this, one railway offered to carry the mail with night service at $300 per mile per year, and for $200 if the Department would so arrange the schedules that the running would fall entirely between sunrise and sunset.[2]

The chief reasons have now been presented, showing why the railways did not, and could not, at once offer a mail service greatly superior to that they found in existence. During the first decade, and even later, it was a contest between a slightly inferior but well-organized mode of conveyance, which was in complete possession of the field, and which, by long years of service, had become nicely adjusted to the work required, and a slightly superior medium of transportation, but unorganized, disjointed, with little flexibility, and as yet wholly unadjusted to the work expected of it.

As I have already stated, the inability of the railways to give a service materially better than the one already at the disposal of the Post-Office Department, explains why the mail traffic was not more generally

[1] Ibid., p. 41.
[2] Ibid., p. 33.

transferred to them than it was. In 1842 the mail was carried upon only 3,091 of the 4,026 miles of railway then in existence. In some few cases the mail was not transferred for other reasons than the inability of the railway to provide better service. The Postmaster-General reported that several railways demanded greater compensation than he was willing to allow. But broadly speaking, I believe it can be said that the abandonment of the stages and the more complete utilization of the railways was due to the fact that when all things were considered, the railway service was not sufficiently superior to the established service to render a change desirable. The predictions of the wonderful speed with which persons and intelligence would soon travel, made when the first railways were opened, had not yet been realized.

But notwithstanding the small progress that was made in the first decade of railway transportation, Horatio Allen was soon to be justified in making his decision, in 1829, in favor of the locomotive rather than the horse, as the motive power to be adopted by the South Carolina Railroad, then about to be opened. He took his stand, he said, "on the broad ground that in the future there was no reason to expect any material improvement in the breed of horses, while . . . . the man was not living who knew what the breed of locomotives was to place at command."[1] The stages and post-riders had nearly reached, if they had not already attained, the limit of their accomplishments. Fifteen miles an hour was too fast a life for even the toughest horse to endure it long.

Although wonderful progress in railway transportation was not made for many years, enough was accomplished, however, to justify abundantly the predictions

[1] The American Railway, p. 104.

made by Horatio Allen and his fellow pioneers. The discovery and utilization of the electric telegraph; the substitution of T-rails for the light strap, bar, and edge rails that had been laid on many lines; the heavier locomotives this made possible; better bridges; closer connections; the amalgamation of short antagonistic bits of railway into one harmonious line; and the more general operation of trains during the night hours, all these, and other factors not mentioned, so increased the effectiveness of the railways that the great stage lines fell out of the race. By 1850 a few railways for the accommodation of through mail and passengers ran trains at 25 miles per hour.[1] While this would not now be looked upon as rapid running, it represented a material improvement, and was fast enough to win the traffic for the railways. Not much progress seems to have been made during the next decade, at least not on the great eastern lines. In 1860 the Postmaster-General reported that an experiment was made with a night mail between New York and Boston. This was one of the earliest attempts to unite several distinct companies, deriving their charters from as many different states, into one continuous line. The time between these two cities was reduced by this train to 9 hours.[2] The distance being about 230 miles, the average speed maintained was but little more than 25 miles per hour. The service between New York and Washington was not so satisfactory as that between New York and Boston. Twenty miles per hour seems to have been all the Department could secure from the railways forming this route.[3]

[1] 48th Cong., 2d Session, Sen. Ex. Doc. No. 40, p. 50.
[2] Ibid., p. 58.
[3] Ibid., p. 59.

More than thirty years have now passed since the first railway was opened for business. The great stage lines, once powerful competitors for the mail traffic, have ceased to exist, except in the Far West. And even here the great overland stages are soon to be crowded out by the Central and Union Pacific railways, now rapidly approaching each other. But notwithstanding the fact that the stages have long since disappeared from the older portions of the country, stage-coach methods of handling the mail are still in vogue. To utilize the new form of transportation in anything like full measure, a new system of separation should have been introduced. But there was little deviation from the stage-coach ways. The railroads hauled the mail practically as the stages had hauled it before them. But a great departure was about to be made. The mails were soon to be distributed in railway cars instead of stationary post-offices along the route. The car was to become something more than a mere agency of transportation. It was to be the place in which almost all the work of sorting and pouching was to be done, and thus it was to become the backbone of a new system of handling the mail. Before taking up the introduction of the railway post-office, which is the technical name for a car devoted to the distribution of mail, the system the railway mail cars supplanted, will be sketched in barest outline.

The method of handling the mail, in existence anterior to the introduction of the railway post-offices, was built up about what were known as distributing post-offices. From the earliest days until the introduction of the railway post-offices the great problem which constantly vexed the post-office officials was the sorting and pouching of the mails. Before the mail can be

started on its journey it must be pouched. Now obviously there cannot be so many pouches, as there are places for which the mail is destined, because, among other reasons, the weight of the pouches would be so many times the weight of the mail that the means of transportation would be broken down. In many cases there would be a pouch for one letter. Under such a system, the aggregate gross revenues of the Post-office Department for many years would not suffice to pay for the pouches. That these statements are true becomes apparent on a moment's reflection upon the final destination of the enormous number of pieces of mail sent out every day from the Chicago and New York post-offices.

In the very early days the problem of pouching the mail was not serious. The volume of the mail was then surprisingly small. The mail generally went into one pouch. The stage drew up to the post-office, which was usually also the tavern, and the postmaster went through the pouch, and after removing what belonged to him, added what mail he wished to dispatch. This could generally be completed before the horses were changed and the passengers had refreshed themselves, and there was thus no delay of the mail. Even at the time the railroads made their appearance there was no widespread dissatisfaction with the way the mail was handled. The Post-Office Department, under its contracts, regulated the arrival and departure of the stages, and when necessary they could be held until the mail was ready, and thus the mail generally kept pace with the passengers. So long as the movement of the mail was equal to the most rapid transition of the traveler, there was no complaint from the public. There are instances on record,

however, where the patience of the travelers was exhausted. By making up a purse sufficient to indemnify him for the fine the Department imposed, they sometimes induced the driver to abandon the mail.

But long before 1830, the year of the opening of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, a single pouch ceased to hold all the mail on the heavy routes, and the simple methods that once obtained had given way to a more complicated system. As early as 1810 a law was passed authorizing the Postmaster-General to establish distributing post-offices, and he accordingly designated 35 offices as distributing offices. So far as I can learn these offices merely continued to do, but on a much larger scale, what they had already been doing for some time in a small way.

As the tide of emigration spread over the Mississippi Valley, and the number of post-offices multiplied, distribution became more and more difficult. Direct pouching, from each office to every other office for which there was any mail, became more and more impossible, because of the number of pouches that would be required. To keep down the number of bags the mail was now sent to the distributing post-offices from all the offices in the territory of which this office was the center. Here the whole mass was sorted and pouched, and then shipped to the various distributing offices scattered about the country, each one of which now acted as a distributing center, and made up and forwarded the mail to the smaller offices grouped about it. To make all this a little clearer let us suppose the system to be still in existence, and that Chicago and Boston are distributing post-offices. If such were the case, the postmasters in the smaller cities around Chicago would send any mail they

might have for Boston and the smaller cities grouped about it to Chicago, where all the mail for Boston, and the territory of which it was the distributing center, would be put in one bag and sent to Boston, where the bag would be opened, the mail separated, and sent out to the surrounding offices. From this description of the work done in the distributing post-offices it is seen that the name distributing post-office was inadequate. It only described one of the two functions of the office. The initial massing of the mail was quite as important as the later distribution.

Although successful in keeping down the number of bags and pouches required in the transmission of the mail, the distributing post-offices soon became intolerable, because of the delays they imposed. In the stage-coach days, when the current of life moved slowly, they were in keeping with their surroundings; but in later times, after the railway communicated its quickened life to almost everything about it, the old order became unendurable. As I have before stated, so long as the mail kept pace with the passenger there was no complaint, but when the traveler starting from the same place at the same moment, almost invariably reached a common destination one or two days before a letter, the patrons of the post-office began to protest. In the illustration that was introduced a moment ago the letter on reaching Chicago would be taken to the post-office, and in about ninety-nine times out of a hundred it would lose its eastern connection, and very frequently it would miss several connections, and when finally it did get to Boston, it would again have to go to the distributing post-office. The traveler, on reaching Chicago, would in many cases at once board an east-bound train, and

very shortly be on his way. To these long breaks in the journey of a letter the people objected. Finally their protests became so numerous, loud, and emphatic that the officials were forced to look about for a remedy.

At first the ax was laid at the root of the abuses that had grown up in and about the distributing post-offices. The emoluments derived by the postmasters at distributing offices consisted of a commission on the letters distributed. Originally the commission was 5 per cent on letter postage, paid and unpaid. This was afterwards increased by law to 7, and later to 12½ per cent. It was thus obviously the interest of the postmasters of these offices to increase their distributing business to the utmost; and though expressly forbidden by the Department to invite mail from its legitimate channel, this was nevertheless often done. Letters were frequently subjected to so many distributions that the postage paid upon them was entirely eaten up. In some cases the commissions of the postmaster greatly exceeded the entire proceeds of his office and a balance had to be paid him from outside sources.[1] In 1851 and 1852 the Postmaster-General made a strenuous effort to correct these evils and abuses. He framed new regulations designed to cut off unnecessary distribution with its train of evils, and even went so far as to remove summarily several conspicuous postmasters for violating his instructions. The work begun by Postmaster-General Hall was carried on with vigor by Judge Campbell, who became Postmaster-General in 1853. He caused copies of the distributing schemes used in the distributing offices, which were then about fifty in number, to be sent to Washington for examination. Mr. Henry A. Burr, the Topog

[1] Ibid., p. 142.

rapher of the Department, to whom they were referred, found nearly all of them grossly defective and productive of unnecessary distribution with its attendant delays and expense. By direction of the Postmaster-General, Mr. Burr prepared new schemes, but in submitting them he expressed the opinion that so long as the mails were stopped in transit for separation, no scheme of distribution could be devised which would give dispatch, or prevent passengers and express matter from outstripping the mail. The only effective remedy was the abrogation of the distributing post-offices and the transfer of the work of separation to "over the car wheels," as he expressed it. But the force of progress was yet too feeble to take this radical step. It was not long, however, before it was found that, although Mr. Burr's scheme corrected many evils, it was inadequate, long delays still being very frequent. In 1857 another step forward was taken. In this year the number of cities to which there was direct mailing was greatly enlarged, and on the trunk lines the mails were placed in charge of what were known as "express agents," who went with the mail and saw that the pouches were properly transferred at junction points. This practice very largely reduced the quantity of mail that had to percolate through the distributing post-offices, and so far as it extended, prevented passengers and express matter from making better connections, and thus outstripping the mail. Direct mailing having proved successful, it was so far extended by 1859 that 13 of the 50 distributing offices were found unnecessary and were accordingly abolished.

But even after these reforms were made a very large portion of the mail moved in the old channels with all the incidental delays. Only the mail between the

favored cities was accelerated. The great object for which the Post-Office Department was now striving still remained unrealized, and the Department hesitated to make the radical departure necessary to achieve it. The timidity and distrust of anything new which had so long characterized the Department could not be shaken off in a day. But the first step had been taken and the second had to follow. The Department had placed before itself the ideal of giving the mail as great expedition as the most rapid transition of the traveler. This could only be secured by giving the mail at all junction points as close and perfect connections as the passenger could obtain for himself. This meant that on the arrival at Chicago of a mail train from St. Paul all the mail must be ready for immediate dispatch to the several railway stations to catch the outgoing trains, even though mail had been taken on but a few miles out of Chicago. If a passenger could take an omnibus or cab and catch a train, the driver of the mail wagon must get the mail there. In such a scheme there was no place for a distributing post-office. The magnitude of the work that would have to be done in the cars, as well it might, caused the Post-Office Department to hold back. But a start was to be made very soon. A condition had arisen in the West, where neither railway nor post-office officials were so completely under the thraldom of old customs and regulations, which imperatively demanded a change. In July, 1861, the overland mails began to be carried over the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad,[1] this being the first railway to reach the Missouri River. The railroad being new, and the demands upon it being very heavy, on account of the war and the large influx of settlers,

[1] Ibid., p. 81.

and its operation being difficult on account of the guerrilla warfare that existed, the trains were always late. St. Joseph being the most important distributing office in the West, an immense amount of mail arrived there every morning by the railway. The overland stages were scheduled to leave three hours after the train was due. All of this time was required for the distribution of the mail, so when the trains were late the stages, which seem to have run with greater regularity than the trains, left with only a part or without any of the mail. An indefinite continuance of this state of affairs was not viewed with equanimity by Mr. William A. Davis, who had charge of the distribution of mail at St. Joseph. Despite the fact that he was a holdover from the ancient régime, having been forty years in the service, he still placed a very high value on promptness, and set about to find a way to overcome or offset, the lateness of the trains. His remedy was to have the overland mail all ready for the stages when the train arrived. If this were done the mail would not miss the stage, even though the train was full three hours late and the stage started promptly. To save this three hours he urged the postmaster at St. Joseph, and through him the officials at Washington, to be allowed to meet the mail on its arrival at the eastern terminus of the railroad at West Quincy and separate the mail as the train proceeded on its journey across the state of Missouri. His requests were granted, and he seems to have lost no time in putting his plans into execution. On August 5, 1862, he wrote the Second Assistant Postmaster-General a brief account of his experiment. He said, "One of the clerks and myself left here on Saturday, 26th, so as to be in Quincy on Monday, 28th ultimo, to commence the dis-

tribution of the overland mail on the Hannibal and Saint Joseph Railroad. Finding that the mail cars had not been arranged according to promise made . . . . instead of going to Quincy I proceeded to Hannibal, and succeeded in getting cars temporarily fixed, in which (though with some inconvenience) I think the work can be done until the new cars are ready. The distribution was commenced on Monday at Palmyra, and I assisted the clerk going up as far as Clarence, at which place I turned back with the clerk who had come down to go up on Tuesday; assisted up to the same point on Tuesday; turned back and distributed the mail going up on Wednesday myself. We have now got through with a week's service, and can confidently report that when the accommodations are finished that are promised by Mr. Hayward, superintendent of the road, the distribution can be done entirely to your satisfaction."[1] The promised cars were soon completed and put into service. From this humble beginning the service was soon extended, and fortunately, during its formative period, the railway mail service was in the hands of very able men. Limitations of time forbid stating who they were and what they did.

The next important advance in the Railway Mail Service was made in 1875, and the credit for it belongs to Colonel George S. Bangs, who was then general superintendent. Mr. Bangs was a man of unusual energy, courage, and progressiveness, and to him more than to any one else belongs the honor of thoroughly rousing the Post-Office Department to its great possibilities. His administration was epoch-making. It marked

[1] Ibid., p. 143. Up to this time, although there had been some distribution of way-mail in cars, no attempt had been made to distribute through mail.

the end of the old and the beginning of the new order. Broadly speaking, before his time the Department was a non-initiating body. Reforms were thrust upon it from without, and only adopted when inaction would no longer be tolerated. Since his administration the Department has not only shown readiness to adopt improvements laid before it, but has also originated many.

Up to the time Mr. Bangs became General Superintendent of the Railway Mail Service the officials of the Post-Office Department aimed no higher than to secure for the mail as great expedition as passengers could obtain for themselves. Mr. Bangs was not content with this program. He hoped to obtain greater dispatch for the mail. The mail business had always been looked upon as an adjunct of the passenger business. Mr. Bangs hoped to secure exclusive mail trains, whose departure and arrival should be timed to suit the wants of the Post-Office Department. In 1874 he presented his views to Postmaster-General Jewell, by whom they were favorably received, and he was authorized to open negotiations with the New York Central and Hudson River and the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern railroads for a fast mail service between New York and Chicago. For the account of these negotiation which follows, I am indebted to former Postmaster-General Thomas L. James. "It was the old story of making bricks without straw. The Post-Office Department had no appropriation to pay for such facilities, hence it had to depend at first on the public spirit of the railroad authorities. Commodore Vanderbilt, the president of the companies whose lines were to be used, had had dealings with the Department, and was perhaps not altogether sanguine as to the practical issue of the

experiment, or in respect to the countenance it would receive from Congress; but Mr. William H. Vanderbilt, the vice-president, lent a willing ear to Mr. Bangs's proposition, and did his utmost to aid him in putting it into effect. There being no special appropriation available for the purpose in hand . . . . Colonel Bangs stipulated that if Mr. Vanderbilt would have twenty cars built and the service performed, all matter originating at, or coming into, the New York post-office, which could reach its destination at the same time by this line, should be sent by this train, and that the railway companies could have the right to demand a weighing of the mail matter at will, all railroads being paid according to weight. When the details of the plan were communicated to Commodore Vanderbilt, he is reported to have said to his son, 'If you want to do this, go ahead, but I know the Post-Office Department, and you will, too, within a year.' Mr. Vanderbilt did go ahead! He constructed and equipped the finest mail train ever seen, . . . . ran it for ten months, never missed a connection at Chicago, and was always on time at New York. He did not have to wait a year, however, for a realization of the sagacious old Commodore's prophecy. Within three weeks, despite the indignant protest of Colonel Bangs, the mails of three states were ordered to be taken from this and given to another route. A grosser and more wanton breach of plighted faith it would be hard to find, and its results were far-reaching and disastrous." [1]

The Pennsylvania Railroad, not to be outdone by its rival, also established a fast mail service, and thus there was a double service between New York and Chicago,

[1] The American Railway, pp. 318-320.

and the outlook was bright for even wider extensions of the fast mail service, when Congress, in spite of the efforts of the Post-Office Department, passed an act reducing by 10 per cent the already inadequate compensation to the trunk lines for carrying the mail. Very shortly after this act was passed, the Postmaster-General received a letter from Mr. W. H. Vanderbilt, which, after reciting the conditions and circumstances under which the fast mail was inaugurated, closed as follows: "Congress, by its recent action has expressed an unwillingness to provide suitable compensation for the service, and I am therefore obliged to notify you that the fast mail train between New York and Chicago will be discontinued on the roads I have the honor to represent, after Saturday, July 22, 1876."[1] Mr. Thomas A. Scott, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, sent in a similar communication on July 15th.[2] The Post-Office Department, being unable to offer any relief, the fast mail service, which began so auspiciously on September 16, 1875, came to end on July 22, 1876.[3] Colonel Bangs was greatly disappointed at this abrupt undoing of all his labors, and worn out by never-ending toil, and disheartened by the action of Congress, he tendered his resignation and insisted on its acceptance.

Though in operation less than ten months, the fast mail trains had been in existence long enough to establish themselves firmly in the esteem of the business world. They ran between New York and Chicago in 26 hours, making connections at all important junctions with trains to and from a vast territory, and thus advanced

[1] 48th Cong., 2d Session, Sen. Ex. Doc. No. 40, p. 184.
[2] Ibid., p. 183.
[3] Ibid., p. 103.

the mail by twelve, twenty-four, and even forty-eight hours for some sections of the country. The fast mail on the New York Central and the Lake Shore never missed a single connection, and was late at Chicago but three times, and at New York but once.[1]

As may easily be imagined the discontinuance of this admirable service caused a great deal of dissatisfaction and unfavorable comment. In the following year an effort was made in Congress to restore the service, and an appropriation of $150,000 was secured on the 3d of March, 1877. This money was to be paid for expedited service, and became known as "special facility pay." With this appropriation the Department was enabled to restore the fast mail trains. In 1884 several more fast mail trains were secured in other parts of the country without the use of special funds, and since the latter year the service has been so widely extended that there is now scarcely an important mail route in the country that does not have at least one fast mail train leaving at the time and run at such speed as will best meet the needs of the Post-Office Department.

From a place in which there was no separation of the mail the car has become the place in which nearly the whole of the work of separation is performed. The mail is now sent from the stationary post-offices with the least possible separation. Broadly speaking, the mail is now distributed for trains rather than for cities. This allows the mails to be kept open at the central office until almost train time, and it greatly economizes both space and labor in the central office. The through

[1] Ibid., p. 103. There is a slight error in the statement of Mr. James.

mails, for the most part, do not even pass through the terminal post-office. Unless the interval between their arrival and departure is a very long one, they are transferred directly from one station to another. I have been informed by Mr. E. L. West, one of the division superintendents of the Railway Mail Service, that not more than 5 per cent of the mail passing through Chicago is taken to the central office, the other 95 per cent being transferred directly from one train to another.

Although the mail is always received from the city post-offices undistributed, it is never sent to them from the railway post-offices in this condition if this would involve any delay in the ultimate delivery of the mail. On the arrival in Chicago of the morning mail trains the letter-mail for the business portion of the city is ready for the carriers and the letters for the remainder of the city are sorted and are ready to go at once to their respective stations. The Postmaster-General recently said: "It is the intention eventually to absorb all the work of city distribution into the Railway Mail Service whenever the mails can be expedited thereby." [1]

The ideal Railway Mail Service of Colonel Bangs is now a reality. The mail on nearly every railroad in the United States is now the favored traffic. The mail goes on the fastest trains; the mail trains are given the right of way over all other trains; the mail is carried on any train the Post-Office Department may select; no mail is ever left behind, the railways always furnishing sufficient car space regardless of the suddenness of the demand that may be made; the mail cars are furnished with the best appliances that art and science afford; the mail cars

[1] Report of the Postmaster-General, 1895, p. 398.